

Every Young 'Un of this Wildfire Generation Ought to Read

The OLD 'UN

Illustrations by J. D. Gleason

THEY thought he was too old, too cautious, so they laid him on the shelf. But the sea alone can be a sailor's judge—and that's why there's human drama in this stirring tale.

by ROY NORTON

*—who wrote "The Plunderer," "The Man of Peace"
and "The Woman on the Beach"*

CAPTAIN TOM leaned against a pillar in the fish market dazed, upset, feeling that for the first time in his life he had been confronted with a tally of years. The gray old stone quay with its worn and pitted pavement, with its worn and hollowed stone steps leading down to the boat landing, was deserted. The waves of the high tide that had filled the inner harbor softly lapped over them as if deriding him, and life. For more than sixty years he could remember that same lapping invitation; for more than sixty years recall an endless procession of high tides lapping inward from the sea and the outer harbor, as if perpetually and recurrently intent on storming Brixham town. And for more than twenty years, whenever the trawlers went out in fleet formation for a long cruise, he had been chosen as Admiral. Until today!

Always, in his father's, his grandfather's and his great-grandfather's time the same custom had prevailed in the selection of an Admiral; for the fishermen, being free men, registered nowhere save in the staid moth-eaten registers of shore men called "The Customs," recognizing no discipline that was not self-imposed, acknowledging no superior save the one elected from their own ranks, always came together when a great cruise was impending, and there in the market, whose auction bells were silent, whose buyers had withdrawn, whose dealers had disappeared, named him whom they would follow and obey. To be elected Admiral of their own fleet was to them a higher honor than to be an Admiral of a royal navy, for was not their own Admiral chosen in recognition of his skill, his seamanship, his record of achievement?

And now, after twenty years, Skipper Tom was discarded in favor of a younger man. The blow had fallen unexpectedly, because he had for so long been accustomed to this bestowal of authority that he had accepted it as one of the certainties, like the rise and fall of the tides, the equinoctial changes, the full

or waning moons. He was aware of a dull and surprised humiliation, as if his fellows with whom he had worked throughout his life no longer trusted him; but, standing with hands in pockets, and with his gray, clear old eyes fixed abstractedly, absently, on the forest of gently swaying masts beyond the inner harbor wall, he bravely concealed his wounds from the other skippers who, now that the name of "Admiral Pearson" was announced, began moving away.

"I suppose it do be rough on Skipper Tom," said one man speaking to a companion as they passed without observing him. "But he be too old. Us must have what they calls new blood."

"Aye! but—Skipper Pearson, he bain' the same as the old 'un by my way of thinkin'." True, the old 'un be proper cautious, and maybe sometimes us ain't done as much as us might, but—us ain't never lost a ship with the old 'un, have us?"

"Aye! But Captain Tom be too old to be Admiral any more. He be too cautious, as if he was afraid to take any risks."

Captain Tom overheard this also without visible sign of distress, but inwardly hurt. He regarded the other skippers who were moving away and saw that some of them averted their glances, whilst others hailed him with undue friendliness. It was only in the eyes of other very old and tired men like himself, other men with time-bent shoulders and white heads and white beards, that he read a great compassion and understanding. It was as if they too had heard the inevitable knell of youth, the public condemnation of the aged.

With a sudden desire to be alone Captain Tom hastened away from the market, trudging down its long sheltered length and out into the narrow street that bordered it, where many of the roofs of houses were grotesquely sagged as if at last the centuries of their endurance were weakening, and then finally turned into the Overgang that climbed steeply upward toward the cliffs,

this Great Story About—



There, far below him, he saw the fleet he was no longer to command. "Too old!" he mused. "Too cautious, eh? But am I?"

When finally alone he leaned his elbows on a wall and looked downward at the harbor. There, far below him, he saw the fleet that he was no longer to command. Two hundred ships, trim masted, trim hulled, trim bowed, and swung by the tide, seemed facing him, regarding him, waiting for him. They courted, gently, sedately, rhythmically. On but one or two were the enormous trawl nets hoisted up for forty or fifty feet to the mainmast heads, drying, with their protecting loops of cod ends sprayed like drooping festoons of black seaweed from their meshes. His keen old eyes picked out his own ship, the *Seagull*, once the finest of the fleet; but now despite her beauty of line and freshness of paint, she too appeared old-fashioned and

approaching obsolescence. "Us be too old, eh? And no longer wanted! But, after all, be us?" he muttered.

He straightened his huge shoulders, lifted an arm, and clutched it and felt its muscles with a heavy-knuckled and time-battered hand.

"And you," he soliloquized, looking out at the sea to its very far horizon, "can anyone know you better than

I? Haven't I lived within sight or sound or feel of you for more'n sixty-five years? Is there anything about you that you haven't told me or that I don't know? And are you too goin' to cast me off—now that I'm old?"

But the sea, blue, indifferent, gave him no answer and no hope. Instead it seemed to convey to him the warning that thousands of other men and thousands of other fleets which it had borne had come and gone, ephemerally, yielding to the inevitable, whilst it alone endured. A great envy of the endurance of inanimate objects engrossed him: the high cliffs, red or gray; the stern headlands of Berry Head, and the lonely bleak isles of the Thatcher and the Lion; the wide-flung sweep of Torbay; the very roofs of the ancient houses of Brixham that, bordering narrow streets, lay jumbled below. He remembered now that through one street so narrow that the state coach had found it difficult to pass, the Prince of Orange had come more than two hundred years before and had evinced alarm, and therefore been accused of being "too cautious."

He, the dethroned Admiral of a fishing fleet, brushed a heavy hand across his brows and pondered over the justice of two words, "too cautious." Somehow those two words he had overheard down there on the quay hurt the most, for they sounded like disparagement of his courage. To be too old, he reflected, was no disgrace, but to be "too cautious," carried uglier meaning. Cautious? Was he? Perhaps so. Any man who had spent more than fifty years upon the sea must have learned to fear its insensate rages, its murderous destructiveness, its overwhelming might, although he might love it when alone at the wheel or helm as the end of the midwatch neared and the dawn came gently up over quietly brooding depths, or when beneath star-strewn vaults soft winds crooned lullabies through the rigging. But did this profundity of intimate knowledge unfit one for that honor of which he had so long and so secretly been proud. Admiralty, to be called the "grand old man of the fleet?" Would they no longer refer to him in such eulogistic and loving phrase? He was bewildered by thought, and again resumed his way, trudging heavily, monotonously, wearily.

Some strange vagary impelled him to turn out of his customary

route. It led him past a cottage set back a few yards from the old and worn road, a cottage in front of which was a tiny, carefully groomed garden with homely flowers and a strip of lawn upon which a pair of little girls were playing. They looked so much alike as to be indistinguishable and Captain Tom paused as if aroused from his abstraction, looked at them more closely and muttered, "They be the twins. Bob Pearson's kids." He touched his cap peak to the matronly woman who just then appeared in the framework of climbing geraniums about the door, noted that the sign on the gate, "The Haven," had been newly repainted with golden letters, and once more began his climb.

"Hey, Skipper!" a voice bellowed at him over the top of an old wall, and he looked up to recognize one of his own crew, a man but little younger than himself and usually referred to by others as "The Grouch."

"Be it true what that lubber Jim Mast just told me, that they've elected Bob Pearson A'miral of the fleet, or be Jim lyin' as usual?"

"No, he ain't been lyin' this time. It's true," Captain Tom admitted.

"Lord save us!" groaned "The Grouch," and then in proof that it was not uttered in an entirely religious sense burst into a stream of profane and scornful invective, shook his gnarled old hands skyward, seaward, and landward, and despite his years dropped nimbly over the six foot wall and stood in the road beside his skipper.

"I knowed it! I saw it comin' for months, that he was goin' out to get it—what with his standin' drinks whenever he got a chance, and palaverin' this 'un and that 'un, and a hintin' that if he were A'miral he'd make things hum! A carryin' on behind your back, he's been, and now—Us ain't goin' to sail with the fleet, be us?"

"Yes, the *Seagull* sails with the fleet, same as always," said Captain Tom patiently. "Us can't afford to show any ill temper over—over a little thing like that."

"Ill temper?" screamed "The Grouch," quivering with rage. "Ill temper! Ef I were twenty year younger I'd go down there and heave that blighter into the bay, I would! Damn his eyes!"

"Don't 'ee be a fool! Talk sense!" Captain Tom admonished. "It's nothin' to fight about. They do say I be too old an' too cautious. Well, maybe I be. An', I don't know as I wanted the responsibility any more anyhow, an' I be proper glad that Bob's to be the new A'miral," he bravely lied. "What's more, man, if you be doin' as I want 'ee to, you'll say nothin' more about it to anybody."

The old fisherman stopped aghast at such tame submission, and then reiterated, "But I tell 'ee Bob Pearson did 'ee dirt! Worked behind yer back and—"

"An' the Good Book," interrupted Captain Tom, "tells us to forgive them that do us injury."

"An' so I do! An' so I do! After I've damned well soaked 'em!" remarked the veteran. But after Captain Tom had turned the corner and was lost to sight between the high stone walls he spat disgustedly, before stretching up on tiptoe to catch the top of the wall and swing himself over to his own garden, and growled: "By the Great Jehoshaphat! Who'd a thought the skipper'd a taken it layin' down, like that! Hanged ef I don't believe he do be losin' his nerve—but—damn him! I'm for him!"

II

Down in the outer harbor, stared upon by the high cliffs and protected from stormy seas by the breakwater that had been more than a hundred years in building, the trawler fleet took on stores. Boats plied more busily and more frequently than on ordinary occasions. Great round loaves of bread were tossed upward to be deftly caught by waiting hands, and thrown down the gaping companionway. Spare gear was overhauled. Men poked their heads into the lazaretto, overhauled its contents, and decided that everything was complete, or said, "Us needs so-and-so, Skipper." Others critically examined warp or rig and approved or censured. In fleet formation the trawlers were bound for sea.

This was to be a long cruise. A "smoke boat" was to accompany them, to bring supplies when food ran short, to pass through them and collect and convey all the catch to the nearest market. Once not a ship of the fleet save that steam tender had touched shore for nearly three months. Men had forgotten the sight of land and how to stand and walk thereon; but now they had no such expectation. That had been a marvelous voyage from the proceeds of which men of the crews, "sharemen" all,

had bought and paid for homes. It could not be repeated, but there was always hope. And men had forgotten that this memorable epoch was in times when Captain Tom was Admiral of the fleet. That was the irony of it!

Waiting for a breeze, the fleet felt it at last. The main tops'ls that had languidly sagged in wrinkles and creases filled. The huge red mains'ls stiffened like the taut heads of eager drums, resonant to the beat of the winds, throbbing to the call of the sea. Ship after ship moved. Outside the breakwater with its white lighthouse they thrust out running bowsprits, and the red sails increased until they bellied as an accompanying cloud above each wind-driven hull. Ship after ship took the same heel, and as if in unison agreed they behaved with unified restraint. Two hundred and odd they ripped the waves of Torbay, passed the lone islands on the port side and headed away on the cruise. They scattered only enough to prevent blanketing one another from the propelling and favorable winds.

"Old as 'er be, I'll bet the *Seagull* c'd beat that there *Quickstep* in a gale," said the "second hand" of Captain Tom's boat, eying the Admiral's trim ship that had the place of honor.

"Aye! Her could," agreed the white-haired old "third hand" "The Grouch" of the crew who had been with the *Seagull* ever since she had been launched. "Her be the best heavy weather ship ever put to sea. Skipper know'd what he wanted, an' got it. He were a sight younger then an' he says to the builder, 'Damn they plans! Four an' a half good more keel-line an' a yard by a half less overhang by the stern,' an' when they builder chap says 'nought but a fool an' no sailor'd do that,' the old 'un hit 'un so quick did see stars. Then skipper did have ship builded like he wanted her, an'—her be the best ship that ever lived out a storm!"

"Aye! Her be," the mate agreed with a touch of pride as if he too had aided in her designing. "Her be!" And then suddenly, "what the hell do 'ee mean by throwing they sweepin's over that side? That's the weather side—over there! Let me ketch you doin' that again an'—"

He made an angry dash at the new cabin boy and when the latter dodged nimbly down the companionway bent over the opening and bellowed threats, then returned to the ancient mariner and remarked with a grin, "nothin' like larin' they boys right from the start if us is to make proper fishermen outen 'em, eh?"

"Right an' proper," sagely agreed the ancient mariner who had so long before served that apprenticeship, through which every man must pass if he would become a "fisherman" of the Brixham fleet, that he had almost forgotten it.

Up through the broader widths of the channel, tacking, reaching, ever sailing, and gratified by fair winds or temporarily annoyed by contrary breezes, the fleet made its way to the chosen grounds. Sometimes, as they made sail, took long reaches and beat back, the men who moved hastily about the decks envied the steam tender that, independent of the winds, lazily, smokingly unperturbed, held its even way; but always they maintained a suppressed contempt for her crew because those were not sailors, after all. They were men who had not the sporting instinct or the knowledge to gamble with the storms, and the handling of great sheets of canvas where life itself depended upon experience and dexterity.

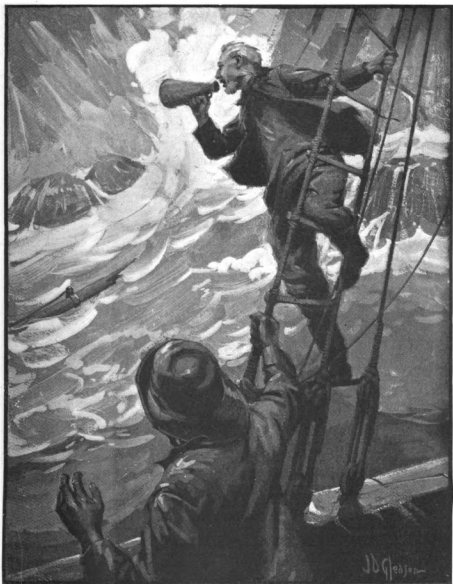
"Well, the A'miral has picked good ground," Captain Tom said, after they had reached their goal and put in the first successful day. "Bob's not daft. I'd have come here myself. The tender went off today loaded down to the limit. She was deep in water, lads."

They fell into a regular routine, which consisted in taking fleet formation on the Admiral's orders, and then watching for his signal to shoot the trawls, take course, and with a "pulling wind," drag the great submerged nets along the sea floor until the Admiral flew the signal that caused them immediately to spill the wind from their sails and hoist the trawls upward to dump their contents, silvery, wriggling and squirming, on the wet decks.

For several days they worked heavily, and prosperity seemed with them, and then there came a change in the weather. Winds were variable, or, worse, came not at all, and for hours they lay becalmed, lolling on a sullen oily sea.

"I tell 'ee," said "The Grouch" to the "second hand," "Skipper don't like they weather. He's been walkin' up an' down, up an' down, for'ard there, for maybe an hour, a cockin' 'is head sideways an' a sniffin' the air. When he do that, look out. He knows more about weather than a glass, or all the men in the fleet put together, this new A'miral along with 'em."

He spat contemptuously over the rail, and his companion



"We're running down on ye," he roared. "Stand by to jump."

growled, for to the men of the *Seagull*, all of whom had been aboard her for years, it was like a fighting insult that they were no longer flagship of the Brixham fleet.

"An' they said Skipper Tom were too cautious! That's what they said! Said it of he what bean't afraid of anything that ever walked, swam or blew! I don't like to think of it. It fair gets me riled, it do!"

He had opened his lips to vent more of his anger when he was arrested by the clumping of seaboots behind him and turned to look over his shoulder at Captain Tom, who now leaned his elbows on the rail alongside.

"I don't like it," he said. "It aen't natural. If I'm not

mistook, us'll have the heaviest storm us has ever seen. Not dirty weather, nor rough weather, nor half gale, nor full gale, but somethin' wuss'n us has ever seen. I wish us had more sea room! Look over there. Us bean't more'n two mile offshore an'—I know that coast of France! Cliffs and reefs! Bad reeds runnin' offshore. God help us if a storm do break," he ended in the softened voice that he used when speaking to the Deity direct.

The gray-haired mate, who was a Roman Catholic, spontaneously crossed himself as if silently repeating the prayer. The ancient one, who had never entered church nor chapel but had devout religious convictions of his own, and followed his own

form of worship, lifted a hand and glanced at the darkening skies with respect, quite as if behind the dun, somber clouds was One who would note his gaze.

"Winds a haulin' off to east'ard! See it?" bawled the voice of a man who had been lounging over the rail and staring toward the open channel, as if thinking that in that direction lay home.

The crew of the *Seagull* from skipper to cabin boy hastened to that side of the ship and watched. They saw the sails of one after another distant trawler fill, and the tall masts sway and bob under the impetus, and the ships swing round to spill the wind and remain motionless and riding head-on until given orders. The *Seagull* in but a few minutes did the same. The breeze swept inward until the entire fleet was rocking and swaying with booms "smanging," which in Brixham parlance meant they beat and battered from side to side heavily, as if eager to take advantage of the wind.

"A'miral's signals, sir," shouted one of the crew whose younger and quicker eyes were more observant than those of the others. Captain Tom ran across and stared at the flagship, which lay closest inshore. They were to steer sou' by sou' west and were to shoot their trawls. He hesitated for a moment, shook a doubtful head, looked at the sea, the sky and the coast line, and muttered, "I shouldn't have give that order if I were A'miral of the fleet, but us got to obey lest they say I be a coward! But it bea'n't safe! It bea'n't safe!"

He turned and quietly gave the orders to his crew. They leaped to action, he in their midst, pulling, hauling, directing at the same time. The black mass of net, scores of yards in length, swept over the weather side of the *Seagull* and disappeared beneath the waves when dragged downward by the heavy trawl beam that held open the mouth of that monstrous bag whose binding "mouth ropes," thick as a leg, and whose steel "heads," built to slide upon the sea floor, combined into a weight that would carry it deep. Fathom after fathom of the thick warp paid out of the fore'ard hold. The *Seagull* leaned far over and listed heavily to that work which she had done thousands of times before. It was as if she were a horse, throwing its weight into the collar at the beginning of a long and steep hill, and patiently hopeful to reach the top, knowing that there alone rest and free breathing could be achieved.

Out on a long reach her companions, two hundred and a score, strained in unison, each pulling its trawl across the sea bed. Spritsails, foresails, mainsails, main-topsails, mizzen sails, mizzen-topsails on each were filled until fingers might have dizzied upon them as upon a sounding board. Lashed were the helms once the course was set. Lashed together the great fleet seemed as it swept, preserving the same angle and the same speed, leaning alike with uptilted decks, nosing away on the same course, engaged in the same task, the laborious dragging of the trawls that, fathoms deep, swept the floors of the sea.

And then, acting under the Admiral's orders, each ship suddenly luffed until her sails no longer held the wind, and each ship's winches began the hard task of hoisting the trawl. Despite their age and long service the crew of the *Seagull* were still among the smartest in the fleet, for these were veterans all. The cod end of their net had been opened and the catch put in the bunkers below long before some others of the fleet had cleared north. The wind was climbing. The oily sluggishness of the sea had changed to enormous swells, as if waiting a signal to break into unleashed waves. The air was heavy and oppressive, despite the gathering drought. Up-channel the horizon was somber, sullen, as if contemplating wrathful devastation.

"Behind that," said Captain Tom, staring with sea-worn and weather-wise eyes, "is the worst storm us has ever seen. If I was A'miral now, I'd send us all out'ard. U'll need sea room soon, and—there be a worse storm than the other, off there." He pointed into the dusk of the early afternoon that was like the dusk of twilight.



"A'miral givin' orders, sir," shouted the cabin boy, enthusiastic in his first regular cruise.

Captain Tom, huge, broad and bent-shouldered, standing with legs wide apart and ungainly sea-boots as fixed as if built into the deck, glared toward the flagship. For a moment he could not believe it possible that such orders had been given. He brushed a hand beneath his sou'wester to rub it perplexedly over his brow and looked again. It was as if he doubted his vision. His lips shut tight beneath the white mustache and beard. His big chin quivered.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. And then as if to make certain, he moved on his heels and stared again toward the threatening north, at the northwest where banks of clouds seemed surging rebelliously, and out to the west whence came the increasing wind. He suddenly slapped the rail with a big hard palm and roared: "Either the A'miral's mad, or I be a fool. They say I be too cautious, or afraid, an' maybe I be. Boys, A'miral's ordered fleet to shoot trawls again, but I'll be damned if I'll do it. Are you with me?"

His face lightened at the unanimous and hearty growl of assent, proving that the men of his crew still esteemed him the most capable man in the fleet, and were ready to pay for their belief. To refuse deliberately to obey the Admiral's orders

They threw a boy bodily across the raging gap. Then one by one they leaped.

could have but one consequence, withdrawal, forfeiture of profits and shares in the catch and—the *Seagull* was many days' voyage from home. It required courage of convictions. Captain Tom thought of all this and appeared hesitant and reluctant. He was thinking of the needs of his men and what the sacrifice meant to them.

"You needn't bother about us, Skipper," shrilled "The Grouch," as if reading his mind. "Us takes your judgment clean and whole. If they others don't like it, they can go hang!" "Good," said Captain Tom quietly. "Us'll up sail and out. Sea room's what us'll need within another hour."

They fell to work, silently, deftly, with the skill of long companionship in a task. It was scarcely necessary to give an order. The *Seagull* shook herself free, took on way, and slipped out-

with rage, sprang up on the rail, clutched the shrouds with one hand and shook a fist as he cried back: "You block-headed blighter! Ef ever I run foul of you ashore I'll make you eat that or else I'll cut your black heart out!"

He was still spluttering when the mate put brawny arms out, seized him around his legs and jerked him to the deck.

"Stow it, old 'un! Stow the gab!" he cautioned. "All they'll do'll be to laugh at 'ee. Don't 'ee give they swabs that satisfaction. That be a Lowestoft man. He bean't from Brixham, so—shut up!"

The last of the fleet was left behind. Captain Tom felt a great loneliness and regret. He stood moodily and in great depression by the starboard rail staring backward with hurt eyes. They would say many unkind things of him; that he had refused to obey his successor; that he was sore because he had been discarded; that he was as cautious as an old farmwoman carrying a basket of eggs; that he was a coward. He began to doubt himself and questioned again and again whether he was overly cautious and overly careful. But his eyes when he lifted them to scan the blackening horizon, his nostrils that caught the peculiar



scent, wafted from afar, of deep waters and deep seagrowths torn from the bottoms, his keyed expectancy, his straining eardrums,

insisted that his judgment had not been at fault.

"I tell 'ee, Skipper be right. I be jiggered if he bean't! They's the wust storm a-comin' as has been ever see'd. Look 'ee off sta'b'd!" The ancient was again shouting in his shrill, aged voice and Captain Tom looked. He saw off in the distance, advancing upon them in fury, the unmistakable advent of the storm.

All his apathy disappeared. He leaped to action as an old war horse leaps and quivers to the sound of the bugle in a charge. He bellowed orders to helmsman and men, and in frantic haste they doused tops'l, fores'l and double reefed the great mains'l leaving nothing but sprit and mizzen set to hold the *Seagull's* head into the wind. Before their task was done the storm was upon them, pouncing down, invisible but terrifying, without form or shape, but endowed with a million rending hands. The *Seagull* shivered, quivered, and fought for life. Staunch as she was, handled as well as nothing but supreme seamanship could handle, victor in a thousand other battles, she seemed sobbing for breath, surviving only through desperate resolution. Time and again in that irregular, tempest-riven sea, she could not throw off the tons of water that swept her from bow to stern before another deluge threatened to send her to the bottom and end the fight.

There was no regularity in the enormous waves that hammered and battered her. They could not be timed and met. Black clouds swept down until they whipped the waves, seemed thrown upward, to fall again as if they bounced like great balloons, tossed, retossed, and tossed again. Then, as if the wind had savagely interfered, they were swept away, swirling, torn, momentarily vanquished, and the men of the *Seagull* caught their breaths and stared back through the rift in the murk. When last there had been visibility, the tops'ls and upper parts of the great

ward. The crews of some of the trawlers they passed, who were made up of younger men, derided the *Seagull*, shouting, "That's right! Home's the place for you'n if the weather be smirchy . . . Go it, old 'un. They said 'ee be proper cautious, and 'ee be!"

Captain Tom stood with his legs planted, motionless, mute, but the men of his crew, gray or white to the man, bawled back profane and angry replies. It was hard to run away. The last stinging comment came from a Lowestoft man who shouted: "Ye should change yer vane. Ye need a white feather instead of a blue flag at yer peak!" And the ancient mariner, quivering

red mains'ls of the fleet had been seen, but now nearly all these were gone. Here and there one fled like a frightened bird. A sense of terrifying disaster overwhelmed the men of the *Seagull*. They stared at one another, as they stood, wet, dripping, breathless, and surmised the truth. A curious lull in the storm had enveloped them, as if the tempest, overstrained in its initial charge, had paused to gather breath.

"Around with her, lads! Steady now. Stand by to jump. Move lively. Back we go for—by God!—they need us there."

Captain Tom's voice had the old trumpet sound. They bellowed approval, and took the risk. They even gave her another rag of sail, and she staggered as if in protest, wallowed for an instant, and buckled into it. She fled like a seahawk back over her course, ripping the waves, reckless of the danger of being pooped if the storm increased, and tore down upon the scene of wreck. She came upon ships in flight with torn sails, and then, closer inshore, ships that lay supinely upon beam ends with not a living thing clinging thereon. There seemed nothing to save. And then, well inshore, they saw two trawlers valiantly fighting for something and bore down upon them.

"They're trying to drift a line down to one that's taken the rocks," the mate announced from the post of vantage in the shrouds that he had recklessly dared. "They on the outer reef be dismasted. They be hangin' on and—they be dead men!"

He was suddenly pulled aside by Captain Tom, who climbed aloft and, clinging there, swaying, tossed as if the *Seagull* in agony wished to shake him loose, peered landward. Instantly he dropped downward to the deck. "Head on again, lads! Bring her up! Take a chance," he shouted. And again the *Seagull* took the great risk, wallowed, threw off the water and rode head on. She drifted perilously near one of the fleet that was still trying to float a rope down to the wreck.

"Her be the Admiral's *Quickstep*," shouted a man through cupped hands and then: "God help 'em. They be done. Us can't get a line aboard. Us be nearly finished ourselves."

From his precarious hold Captain Tom surveyed the situation. He saw high cliffs, and torn belts of foam stretching seaward, showing the reefs on which the unfortunate *Quickstep* had been caught and was now being hammered as she rose and fell. Oak had never been grown or fashioned to a hull that could long withstand that battering. Clinging to that wreckage were five human beings, one, doubtless, the man who had superseded him in command of the fleet. But there was no time to lose, for already the reefs were gaining their mastery and the waves seemed eager to end their work.

"Boys," he called down to the men beneath, though all were battered and scarred by years, "them has but one chance in a

thousand. If us tries to save 'em, us has but one chance in a thousand more. It's never been done, and mebbe it can't be done. But can us let 'em drown without tryin', or else drownin' ourselves? If you agree, we'll try to pick some of 'em off or—drown with 'em. What say?"

It was much to ask. They were too sea-wise not to grasp what he meant, and the precarious issues. Three of them had wives and children at home, and then they remembered that out there, clinging to a wreck, washed by higher waves, despairing,

were other men who also had wives and children far away in Brixham town—far, very far, very placid as they remembered it. It was as if it had been years since last they sailed from that warm and friendly port. To regain its great and inviolable shelter seemed now the greatest of dreams. They could accomplish it if they but sailed away. But sailing away left those others out there on the black and breaking wreck to an inevitable doom. God! Hadn't they already seen wrecks enough with not a living thing clinging to the capsized sides and keels? Could the rescue of the Admiral, who in daring folly had brought this deluge of sorrow, assuage the bitterness of such wholesale loss?

They hesitated, weighed, considered, there in the lull of the storm, looking now at the black, breaking thing on the reef, and thence upward to the cruel cliffs, to the long lines of thundering waves that battered against the foot wall, and finally at their skipper who, huge and gnarled, clung and swayed above them, looking downward into their eyes, waiting for them to answer.

"A man can't die more than once. He hasn't more than one life to give, lads," he said in a voice that sounded inordinately solemn and quiet in that wait. "But—as for me—mine's most done anyhow! If this is my day to drown—well—I'll drown with no complaint. But I can't live after today with the memory that I didn't do all I could to help they others off. Do we try?"

The gray-haired mate, who had grandchildren of his own, stared up at him with somber eyes. The one man whose life was still strong and virile, shuffled his feet and looked pityingly across at the constantly

breaking wreck of the *Quickstep*. The man at the helm dodged and swayed with the turgid roll of the *Seagull*, seemingly intent upon his task, but in reality weighing his love of life against what he might remember if he failed in this minute of vital distress. It may have been the voice, querulous, creaking, time-worn, of the ancient mariner that decided them. This "Grouch!" This agnostic in the midst of men who went humbly to chapel or to confession!

"By the love of Christ!" it cried. "Although there's none to care for me, and I be all alone, and I like to live, I can't leave 'em there that way. I'd rather end it (Continued on page 111)"

Does One Ever Get Too Old to Do the Really Big Things?

IF you were to take a census of the big, active figures in the world today—the men who are doing big things—you would find that most of them are more than sixty-five years of age. Since the war we've stopped calling this "the young man's age."

Chauncey M. Depew, for instance, is eighty-seven; so is Dr. Charles W. Eliot. Lyman Abbott is eighty-six; "Uncle Joe" Cannon, eighty-five; Lord Bryce is eighty-three, as are John Wanamaker and Marquis Shigenobu Okuma. John D. Rockefeller is eighty-two; Henry Holt, the publisher, and Henry Watterson, the editor, are eighty-one; and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is eighty, the same age as Georges Clemenceau, "the tiger of France."

George Brandes, the writer, is seventy-nine; Senator Knute Nelson is seventy-eight, which is the age of the Rev. Russell H. Conwell and Justice Joseph McKenna of the Supreme Court. Doctor Harvey W. Wiley is seventy-seven; so is George Hazen Putnam, the publisher. Sarah Bernhardt is seventy-six, of an age with Elihu Root. Thomas A. Edison is seventy-four, born in the same year as Alexander Graham Bell. The Right Hon. Arthur James Balfour is seventy-three; Justice William R. Day of the Supreme Court is seventy-two, as are Luther Burbank, Frances Hodgson Burnett and Samuel Gompers. Henry Cabot Lodge is seventy-one, as are Cyrus H. K. Curtis, the publisher, Albert B. Cummins, Daniel Carter Beard and David Starr Jordan.

Marshal Ferdinand Foch is seventy. That's the age of Sir Oliver Lodge. Henry Van Dyke, the author, is sixty-nine. Joseph Jacques Joffre was born the same year.

John Drew, the actor, is sixty-eight, as is Sir Hall Caine, and Robert Underwood Johnson and Thomas Nelson Page, both authors and former Ambassadors. Robert B. Mantell, the actor, is sixty-seven, also George Eastman, Frank A. Munsey, the publisher, and John Sharp Williams. Dr. L. Emmett Holt, Samuel Rea and John Hays Hammond are sixty-six.

George Bernard Shaw, Edward L. Doheny, John S. Sargent, Judge Louis D. Brandeis, Henry Morgenthau and former President Woodrow Wilson are sixty-five.

The Old 'Un

(Continued from page 26)

here. I say, let's try. If us drowns, us drowns. If us don't, mayhap us saves 'em. Us can at least die like men from Brixham town!"

Suddenly, as if hesitation were over with, knowing that the odds were hopelessly against their own survival, they belatedly their assent, their defiance of fate.

Captain Tom, with white beard twisted and tossed by the overlapping winds, gave a quiet order to the helmsman. "Bring down past 'em, close enough so they can hear me. Then us'll tack and tetch back on the wind'ard reach."

He still clung there in the shrouds as the *Seagull* swept down upon the wreck to within sixty or eighty yards, and then as if frightened by the reefs sheered off toward the open sea; but as they went past, his voice, sea-trained, roared through the megaphone: "We're going to try to run down on ye. Stand by the starn to jump. It's the only chance!"

Even the men of the wrecked *Quickstep*, in their terrible extremity, found time to gasp and look amazed at his daring. It was recklessness superb, foolhardiness in the extreme.

The *Seagull* flew out seaward, headed up the channel on an inward tack, came about and shortened some of her sail.

"Us must carry just enough to make sure of clearing well and keeping good steerage way," Captain Tom insisted. "But steerage way us must have."

The *Seagull* slid past a wreck, narrowly missed a second, and a third, and her men looked grave. The sea seemed littered with disaster, as if to forewarn them of their own great risk. Captain Tom climbed down from the shrouds and called to the mate: "Come you with me to the helm. She'll need handling, Bill, up for'ard with 'ee, and—here! Take this megaphone."

"Aye!" was all the ancient said as he took his place. The wind whisked his sou'-wester from his head, and his white hair and beard blew wildly.

The terrific smash of the breakers upon the reefs, the resounding roar of great waves beaten to spray on the foot of the cliffs, the angry hissing of sea bellowed and ripped round them in a pandemonium of sound. Nearer they came, nearer, never faltering, and despite their shortened sail running like a maddened horse blind to the menace of destruction. The agnostic's lips moved as if in prayer. The cabin boy, wide-eyed, bareheaded, white-faced, clung convulsively to a combing. The fourth hand who bent over the weather rail tensed and in readiness to fling himself forward to assist anyone coming within reach muttered over and over again, "My God! God! My God!" as if to relieve himself of the strain. Death was within a few yards now. They were tensed to the point of breaking, and Captain Tom, as if reading their minds, jerked them back to their senses with a great shout, "Steady! Steady, lads! Now! Now she takes it!"

Instantly as if unleashed from a spell of silence, there was a confused bellow of shouts, oaths, prayers, exclamations and meaningless cries. The hands of Captain Tom and his mate tightened heavily, their arms fixed themselves like rigid bars, their

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Tom Brown
as he appears
in "Tip-Top"

feet in the clumsy seaboots seemed to take fresh grips upon the deck, and the *Seagull* shot down past the stern of the breaking *Quickstep*. A boy was thrown bodily across the gap to fall on her decks wildly embracing her captain. Another figure sprang into the air to fall face downward and with outflung arms go sliding across the wet planks. Two more followed who landed well, a fifth, the Admiral of the fleet, the last to jump, failed to clear the rail, but caught it with one desperate arm, and was seized and jerked bodily aboard.

And all this time neither Captain Tom nor his mate ever relaxed. Intent and absorbed in their terrifying task, they might have been unfeeling automatons, indifferent to the efforts of those they had come to save. They threw the helm over, stood tensed when the *Seagull* missed the outer end of a reef by feet, rather than yards, held their breaths in suspense in that moment when fate was to decide whether she could clear or must risk herself to pieces on the black tusks beneath, then, as if herself terrified by the dangers through which she had passed, bent far over and fled swiftly toward the open sea.

But "The Grouch," bent forward with both gnarled hands raised in mid air and the megaphone rolling to and fro about his feet, saw the wreck of the *Quickstep* disappear beneath the waves almost immediately after the Admiral's crew had been rescued. His vocabulary was again lean and paucid and he fell to screaming: "Lord! Good Lord! Five minutes more an' they'd a been gone. Five minutes! Only five minutes!"

III

WHEN the *Seagull*, still flying as if frightened, sped out into the blackness of the sou'west, her last view was that of scattered ships, some of which were frantically repairing damages, others of which stood by, and still others that fought bravely outward with broken masts and torn sails.

"There be enough there, so us can do no more. They need no help from us," said Captain Tom, as he turned the helm over to another man.

He walked over to where the Admiral and two others were binding up the injuries of the man who had slid across and battered head and hands against the lee bulwarks. The Admiral, young, stalwart, frank, got from his knees to his feet and stared at Captain Tom. He put out his hand which Captain Tom accepted, stood there for a long moment, gulped as if some emotion had rushed upward to throttle him and then could say no more than: "Aye, Skipper Tom! By God! Thou art a man. A sailorman! A fisherman! And I bear't fit to hold thy hand!"

"Humph!" said Captain Tom. "It's nought!" And then made a vast pretense of being occupied in looking after his ship.

The Admiral sought the loneliest part of the ship, and sat, hour after hour, with his head bent forward and resting in his hands, as if perpetually considering, reviewing, and thinking of those scores of men who slept on the sea floors off the coast of France. He could not find pardon from the fact that they had expected him to take chances, and that he had accepted

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them. He sometimes thought he could hear the shouts of drowning men as they were tossed, thrown and wafted by cruel waves, until the despairing cries were silenced by the ultimate and muting hand of death.

The wind was warm and constant, but the skies overcast, as if in mourning, when the *Seagull*, the first of what was left of the *Brixham* fleet, two hundred sails and more, swung round Thatcher rock and headed across Torre Bay. She seemed to creep inward with reluctance as if considering those to whom she must bear sad news.

Futile! Futile all! From the wires had come the tale of tempest, of wreck, and wholesale death, and the certainty that of the thousand and more men who had sailed forth many were those who could never return. The *Seagull* slipped, sea-silvered, battered, infinitely fatigued, to her moorings in the outer harbor. Her "scuffer" came out in his boat. Captain Tom looked around for the *Admiral*, slipped to the companionway, shouted once, and then, getting no response, heavily descended the steep steps.

In the tiny cabin aft sat a man with head bowed over arms. Captain Tom hesitated, then went forward and put a hand on the bent shoulders. He hesitated again, seeking words, for his was no free and facile tongue.

"Bob," he said, "Bob, mebbe it's best I go ashore first, after all. I came down to get 'ee, but—but—yes, I think I'll go down by itself and alone. It's hard luck, but don't 'ee mind. It weren't your fault."

Then he climbed heavily up the steep steps, walked heavily to the side, threw a seaboot over the rail, rested on the strake, stepped downward with trained but unconscious poise into the bobbing boat and said, "Ashore. They others'll come later." The scuffer bent to the oars.

The boat crept toward the opening that would disclose the inner harbor. It brought to view the broad-floored roofs of the deserted fish market, and the worn old quay; but the quay was not deserted. For as if the news of the first arrival from the seas of tragedy had spread, the pave was crowded with anxious or weeping women, and with children who clung to skirts or hands. Men too old for service, bent, gnarled, decrepit, stood amongst them striving to comfort to the bitter end.

A peculiar silence brooded over all when the scuffer's boat with the white-headed old skipper came jerkily to the worn steps of the boat landing. To him it was as if their yearning eyes appealed for solace. He could not meet them. He looked away over the harbor sides, up at the skies, and down at the water. His seaboots seemed to hammer inordinately loud upon the beaten stone as he slowly ascended and the iron-shod heels awoke echoes, as if in that perturbed suspense all sounds were magnified.

He gained the top. He halted, sadly facing those in wait. Twice he tried to speak; but the voice that for more than fifty years had bellowed audibly above the roar of surging seas refused service. Suddenly and despairingly he lifted both hands high on outflung arms, tried again, and cried, "I can't help 'ee. I can't. God knows I wish I could tell who's gone and who's saved! Name they that will come back, and they who never can, but—but I can't!"

"Aye! An' the word do come that they were caught by they storm with all they trawls out to drag 'em to beam ends, to wreck, an' to death, and so it must be that it was the new A'miral who was—"

The profound pity and compassion in the tired old eyes gave way to a sterner look as Captain Tom turned to regard the gnarled old man who had shouted that unfinished accusation.

"It we'n't the A'miral's fault! He did the same as mayhap I'd of done had I been A'miral myself, and ordered 'em to shoot their trawls. He ain't to blame. He did his best. It was the sea, the storm, the tempest, that none can see or foretell that murdered them all. If the A'miral himself or anyone else tells you different, don't believe it."

He glared almost sternly at those about him, and then:

"Listen! Hark 'ee all!" he exclaimed, hoarsely, as if distress had robbed him of vigor, "Us all be of Brixham Town. Us know—because us must—*must*, I say!—that sooner or later, it—the sea—must claim its men. And the women of they men ashore must be brave because us of Brixham have nothing else to live for and by, but the sea and God! So us mustn't question when they two call. God and the sea!"

A haggard woman's hand timidly but insistently tugged at the skirts of his sea-sun, and storm-faded coat, hoping to wrest from him words of hope. He tried to free himself, twitching impatiently. The distressed hands multiplied, until in something akin to a pitting desperation he exerted his strength, tore loose and, forcing his way through the crowd, elbowing right and left, thrusting his great chest outward like the brow of a battleship bursting through waves, he gained the edge of that shore of sorrow. He felt his rudeness. It hurt, for his heart grieved with the burden of memories, and knowledge of what many of them must endure. He wished to God that he might take them all into his arms, and that they might be big enough and strong enough to console them all. And then appreciating the utter futility of his wish, he fled through a narrow climbing street until, breathless and spent, he gained a high point, leant across a wall and stared downward.

Everything was visible; the borders of the blue, unbroken and immutable sea; the fleckless blue of the skies; the blueness of glamorous and infinite space. It brought peace in measure to his soul. There must be something behind all that, some recompense for weariness, for steadfastness and sustained toil. This couldn't be the end. He felt uplifted as if by confirmed conclusion after long doubts, and then leaning against the stone wall, tired and old, and thinking of those on the pier, widows and orphans now, who had clung, yearned, and besought him for news, those from whom he had fled, he abruptly brought both clenched fists down upon the top stones and muttered despairingly, "I ran away! I held back the truth that I could have told so many of 'em because I didn't have guts enough to tell 'em—didn't have the courage to deliver the blow that would end their hopes. I couldn't! I wasn't brave enough. Lord help me! For I've proved a coward—after all."



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